

I Am Here For You

Emma Fiandt

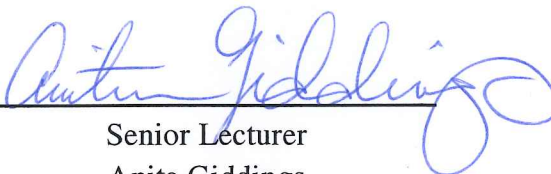
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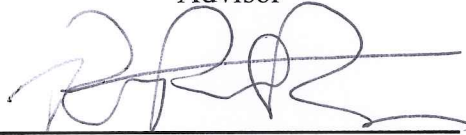
I Am Here for You

By
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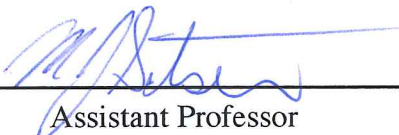
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For me, art and life are one. The subject matter and material I work in are both, at a surface level, myself. My work functions with the understanding that we are all constructed from cultural forces, specific ideas about the world that are mostly invisible to us. My work aims to identify and better understand this process of creating self. To do so, I've taken on two opposing personas, each of which is a composite of a selection of my actual traits/personality so that each of the characters is a facet of myself isolated from the whole. This de-construction and re-construction of my own personality gives me perspective and context to issues we all grapple with—questions like 'who am I?' or 'how do I communicate with others?' The work is also very much about being female, and how our identities are constructed around the idea of gender.

I've long been obsessed with the idea of life as performance art. Ray Johnson is my biggest influence, and have always been absorbed with the way he seemed to perform his entire life, himself. In search of a way to make this type of work, I was also inspired by artists like Nikki Lee, whose series *Projects* documented the artist as she became a part of certain subcultures and photographed experiences there, performing life events for a camera. The work also draws inspiration from emerging contemporary writer, performer, and filmmaker Lena Dunham. In her debut film *Tiny Furniture* and her HBO series *Girls*, Dunham plays characters that are fictionalized version of herself. Always a little self deprecating, Dunham's characters represent opportunities to explore parts of herself with the safety of knowing she's playing a role, even when the character is modeled on herself.

The other pillar of this work is its relationship with feminism and gender identity. It was not until I was an undergrad that I began to read feminist writings by Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler, but once I did, their ideas begin to inform and ease the enormous discomfort I felt/feel in my role as a woman. I have always struggled with seeing femininity as a hindrance to the things that I am and that I want to be: smart, strong, brave, independent, funny, outspoken, crass. I have no desire to be delicately waifish, or mind my manners, even though I am very much a woman. These feminist thinkers support the idea that there is no right or wrong way to be a woman, and help me understand how society is structured to make me feel the opposite.

Once I understood how culture is built on antiquated ideas about gender, my femininity became consciously heavy—something I carry with me at all times. Now sensitive to the male gaze¹, an idea from film critic Laura Mulvey which describes a culture centered on male perspectives, I can't watch a commercial, or look at packaging at the grocery, or be hit on at the bar without filtering what I see and hear through the rhetoric of imposed gender identity. I am interested in which things in our culture are gendered (everything), and how that impression of gender shapes almost every aspect of how that thing is seen or interacted with. I also yearn to better understand myself outside these forces. Who would I be if I hadn't based my likes and dislikes, desires, fear, and adulations on this system of false dichotomy? How would my life be different if I leaned into the norm rather than struggling against it?

¹ Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen* 16, no.4 (1975): 6-18.

These are the forces that collided to create my work: burning curiosity about my own identity (which was frustratingly bound to my gender), and this notion that my life is the work. I decided to create characters that are versions of myself (like Dunham) but drop them into my real life (like Ray Johnson), and use them to explore these confusing issues of gender identity. I created two characters that are on opposite ends of a binary—“girly” and not.

First there’s Em. Em addresses the question ‘what would my life be like if I leaned into gender stereotypes?’ She is called Em after M&Ms, because she’s sweet like candy. Her style and hair are cartoonish exaggerations of the feminine—pink everything, sparkles, ponies, tutus. She has a strict dress code to maintain her effeminate appearance: skirts and dresses must be worn at all times, hair must be down and styled.

Em cares about you. She is approachable because she’s polite, even when she doesn’t want to be. Em is always on time to class out of respect for others, she allows herself to think about what kind of wedding she wants (because she believes its something she can have), she will hold your baby. Em is a response to every time I have accidentally said something too mean to someone I love, every time a guy I had feelings for called me bro, the fact that all my friends parents thought I was a bad influence from age ten to...maybe now. Em is a schoolteacher and was deeply wounded when someone scrawled “bitch” across my fence. Em wants your approval, and her existence is fueled by my insecurities about everything from whether you think I look too butch, to whether my mother is going to comment on my eyebrows, to whether he’d rather be with someone thin and stupid. Though Em is capable of

connecting, she's emotionally indulgent and ineffective—too soft, easy to walk on, complacent in shallowness.

Her foil is named Lem, after a song by currently incarcerated rapper Gucci Mane. Lem don't give a shit. She is tough and ballsy. Her hair is a weird blue-green that gets uglier as it fades. The only rule to her dress is that she finishes off any outfit with her signature motorcycle vest. Her make-up would never be contoured, it's war paint. She will get out of her car and yell at you in traffic, flip you off as a greeting, and has no filter for politeness. If she owes you an apology, the best you'll probably get is "bitch, fuck you then."

Lem is pissed about the roles pushed upon her, and she's going to burn them down. Though she's not well liked, she's also not taken advantage of, and that knowledge alone is powerful. Lem is the woman I need when I let sexist jokes go to keep the peace, the woman that can tell scrubs to fuck off, the one who would have named her rapist. Lem is brave. She cannot care about what people think, or their disapproval would be crippling, so she has to be able to take care of herself. She is not ashamed to be miserable, not afraid to look ugly, not shy about telling you how she feels, but is rarely is she emotionally honest, or generous with herself.

Every day, I would decide to either be Em or Lem, and lived exactly as she would. Since both characters are very much me with the other removed, I was surprised how easy it was to feel like these women. Some days I would choose my character based on what was in store for me: meeting someone's parents? Em. Sleater Kinney concert? Lem. Some days I would dress for my mood, and some days I would dress for the mood I wanted to have—Em on a stormy day, Lem when I felt

weak. Em and Lem were tools I could use to hide or be seen, to communicate with others in specific ways, or even to get myself through the day. I could choose a combination of my own strengths and weaknesses to change how I function in day-to-day life.

Living as these two different women both is the art and creates the art. One reoccurring theme in this work is my hair. I'm drawn to hair partially because it is of my own body—really it has no character. It is always mine, regardless of color, style, etc, so on a material level it represents an authentic self. On a surface level though, the hair becomes a metaphor for the two characters. Split dyed pink, and blue-green, the colors represent Em and Lem in a straightforward, visual way. The way the hair is dyed some of each color is always visible, which supports an ultimate inevitability—a failure to fully separate the two. So the hair exists as a part of the performance, viewed by whomever I come into contact with that day.

However, I am also interest in hair as a gendered construct. Americans have a cultural obsession with hair. Style, color, cut, texture, length—hair is seen as an indicator of heath, wealth, status, style, gender. Every magazine cover, youtube tutorial series, every ridiculous question from a reporter about a female politician's dye job, every guy who feels the need to speak up about how they like girl's hair long, helps to create a society that bases a large part of a woman's worth on how her hair looks. Of course there are different criticisms and expectations in various cultures even within the United States, but for women who look like me, there is a clear ideal of long silky locks, perfectly groomed and flawlessly maintained.

Though Em and Lem both defy typical hair norms in terms of color, they do so to different ends. Em seeks out color in the world. She has an almost childlike inclination towards things that are pretty, frothy, fun. She is a cartoon princess, an unfailingly pleasant departure from the darkness of reality. Her hair is long and maintained, it's beauty is comforting, like Princesses Bubblegum or Celestia. Lem wants to look different than you. She wants a hairstyle you would never wear, a color that seems wrong. It's usually dirty, and pulled back in the least flattering way. It is not there to make her easier to look at; it is a part of her armor.

In addition to the performance, I pulled the fuzzy pads of hair that I lost in every day life from my brush and hang them on the wall. The way I brushed my hair each day created a fabric of pink and blue that looks different according to how the hair is handled, so that the production of the objects depend on the motions of my everyday life. The more the hair on my head was manipulated, the faster it fell out, creating a tense relationship between desire to change my appearance and desire to maintain my appearance. When I removed those pieces of hair from their brush context, you can see that the object is a tangled web of both colors that would be impossible to separate, again referencing a failure to ever fully separate the characters from one another.

These pieces of hair are very much about time. The process is slow, it requires many days of performing these characters, simply to show this moment that they share—brushing their hair. In this way, the hair pieces are relics, fossils. They indicate a real person, and make the labor of simply living visible.



Fig 1: *Hair Pieces*, 2015-2016, artist's hair, 3"x5" each

Another piece, which exists much in the same way, is Lem's vest. The vest is an ever-evolving piece made by Lem, covered in patches and pins that express her (rather rude) opinions. My dad calls them pieces of anti-flair—almost the same animal as the riffed on restaurant uniform requirements in the movie *Office Space*, but vastly more hostile. The jacket, like the hair, is an object in the context of the galley, but experience when seen worn by the character of Lem. It is most simply an indicator of Lem-ness—the uniform. But it is also self-portrait both in what it says and what it is. The fact that Lem would be drawn to an article of clothing so impolite, politically charged, and outright offensive reveals what kind of woman she is before the viewer is even confronted with hairy legs, ufos who came to buy weed, and lines like “fall in love, not in line.” It is alienating and intimidating to wear, physically heavy, so it gives her a certain authority of toughness.

As the vest evolved as a costume, it began to bend to some of the persistent undercurrents of this work. First, it came to exist in real time. I initially bought the vest as a men's jean jacket, and it went from unadorned, to a couple things, to covered as I played the character of Lem. Like the character herself, Lem's vest grew over time, became louder, easier to understand, more revealing, and frequent viewers of the every day performance saw her come to exist through this object. Again, this process is heavily based in time. The jacket was something that friends, colleagues, students, and neighbors continued to watch. People noticed when there were new patches, excited for another piece of Lem's self-expression.



Fig 2: *Lem's Vest*, 2015-2016, vest, patches, pins, thread,

Time also molded the vest to my body. The more I wore it, the more it drooped at the edges of my shoulders, frayed where I fidget with the edges, collected my smell. Not only has it become an object of visual representation, it is so known to me, that it makes others uncomfortable to wear it—like they're too close to my personal space. My body also became accustomed to the weight, slightly

altering the way I hold my chest. Like the process of making the hair pieces, wearing the vest changed and recorded how I performed everyday motions, the simplest and most automatic parts of being myself. These objects feel almost magical for me because contain those changes, and the reality of my existence—how my hair falls out, how I move.

One of the struggles in this work has always been how to capture an extended performance that occurs in the real world, and translate it in a gallery setting. This work has always had a complicated relationship with art spaces, because it both craves the authority of a gallery, but is beholden to a level of personal connection that is difficult in highly structured spaces. I see the work as one large project that is inseparable from my life, rather than individual pieces with gallery-specific titles. Pieces of my life become the art, and the production of the art determines what happens in my life until they are one.

My gallery is a casual space—the statement is a handwritten letter to the viewer about the life that this space represents. Many of the pieces are relics of events that occurred elsewhere, but the exhibition itself is an experience, with things to hear, watch, touch, write, read, steal. The experiential nature of the artwork allows viewers different ways to access the project in hopes that honest interaction with my process allows viewers to reflect on ways in which they feel like two different people, are affected by social expectations, and construct their own identities.

It's important to me that viewers can know Em and Lem quickly and clearly, so that they can apply that understanding to the other work. This moment comes

from the most gallery friendly work, life size photographed portraits of Em and Lem. Em is on the left, done up in all pink. Her long, straightened hair cascades over her tight fitting, frilly pink clothing that emphasizes feminine curves. Her eyes are averted, one hand delicately relaxed with her My Little Pony purse on her elbow, the other on her hip. She blows a bubble, both to represent her childlike sweetness, and reference a more sexualized female image.

Lem is wearing her vest, and Orange Mound t-shirt, a significantly rough area of Memphis where she has friends. She scowls directly into the camera with a cigarette limply hanging between her unflatteringly red lips. She stares right at the innocent bystander, flipping you the bird. Lem is aggressive while Em is passive, Lem rude where Em is sweet. Lem's even a little taller. These are the quintessential characters, and their differences are highlighted in contrast to one another.

The portraits are accompanied by an audio piece heard through headphones. Em is speaking in the left ear, Lem in the right. Each audio is of the character responding to the prompt: what is it like to be you? Here the viewer experiences each character's voice, which varies in pitch, volume, and amount of vocal fry (an issue in audio/video where women's vocal inflection changes at the end of a thought). In terms of medium, voice for me is very much in the same category as the hair. You both make it, and are made by it—there is something inescapably authentic about it, even when affected. These voices, though at times they seem theatrical, I recognize from my life outside of Em and Lem. I have used them both unconsciously.



Fig 3: *Portraits of Em and Lem*, 2016, digital photographs, 28"x 40" each
Em/Lem Audio, 2015, digital audio

What the voices describe are narratives that address my actual fears: they both yearn for love, they're both upfront about their strengths and weaknesses, and they both care about other people in their own ways. Em speaks to her self-absorption and her uninteresting obsession with what others think while Lem rattles off half-baked rants about "bitches named Karen." The characters are funny, and their various silliness balance the fact that Em and Lem are actually telling you everything about me.

In the audio, the characters grapple especially with gender. Lem can hardly admit that she wants love, and then describes a friend with benefits, where Em talks singingly about a fairytale. Em believes that when her credits roll she'll have prince charming—probably because every media marketed to women ends in a wedding. As feminist writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie writes in *We Should All Be Feminists* (which is sampled in Beyonce's *Flawless*), "Because I am female, I am expected to aspire to marriage. I am expected to make my life choices always keeping in mind

that marriage is the most important...we raise girls to see each other as competitors not for jobs or accomplishments...but for the attention of men.”² This expectation is built on the idea the men will take care of their wives, and creates a culture where we teach girls helplessness because women are only partially responsible their own well-being.

Em is comforted by this role and the knowledge that love comes with someone to mow the lawn. Lem is embarrassed by the feminine baggage of love, is emotionally distant, unable to let herself want affection because of how the idea of love is packaged with dependence on another. These characters butt up against the two sides of me wanting love—a simultaneous desire to be taken care of and fulfill my expected role (taught to me since birth), and to take care of myself (neither dependent on nor responsible to anyone else’s opinions).

The audio’s depiction of Em and Lem’s feelings on love is just one of the ways it deals with complicated, personal, and hard to define issues of gender and identity. The characters talk about friendships, morals, emotions, and hobbies—all things I find bound inseparably to gender norms, and which Em and Lem deal with as such. In this case, the characters help me to communicate. Em and Lem are fairly one-dimensional, stereotypes that are easy to digest by design. It makes sense that Em loves shopping while Lem drinks. They are easier to understand than Emma, who possesses all their traits in unpredictable quantities. They are each a simplified me, easier to know.

² Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *We Should All be Feminists*. London: Harper Collins, 2014. Print.

However the characters also serve the opposite purpose. They give Emma a deliberate opacity that allows me to admit things I'm ashamed of, investigate my effect on the world, and keep a layer of make-believe between myself and the things that terrify me. They call into question where performance ends, make Emma harder to know. While the performance gave me a deeper understanding of self, it kept that knowledge at arms length from the viewer, and that discomfort led me to work that destroys the barrier between the two characters.

I began to consider the parts of my life that were not a part of the performance of these characters, and one thing I discovered was my own relationship to loneliness. A desire to connect to other people is everywhere in my work, but dealt with most directly in an experiential piece where viewers can listen to the opening of a beer bottle and hear me singing "If you get a feeling next time you see me, do me a favor and let me know, cause it's hard to tell, it's hard to say, oh well, okay." The piece originated in response to a specific longing, and the bottle itself as well as the Elliot Smith song referenced a specific person. However, as the work lead to a greater understanding of self, the bottle was swapped for an empty Unicornopia, a Memphis-made beer whose label features a glorious pink and green mane-d unicorn, and became self-portrait.



Fig 4: *If You Get a Feeling*, 2016, beer bottle, digital audio, 3"x11"

The bottle certainly references the idea of a message in a bottle, something you hope but cannot know will be received, as well as my own relationship with alcohol and socializing. It is about comfort and discomfort, control and lack of control. The sweet but sad message inside repeats, a constant inner monologue about desperation to connect to another. The piece, without being about Em and Lem, contains and expresses them both to create a fuller image of Emma.

Further fleshing out the depiction of authentic self is a box of items, displayed in the gallery on my own home coffee table. Fuzzy rugs and large pillows surround the table so that it is a homey, comfortable space to interact with the piece. The box, which is covered in stickers from breweries, bands and online stores, is filled with sentimental objects that were created in the process of the performance. From an album of polaroids, to hand written birthday cards, museum tickets, and gifted stickers, each of the objects has a sentimental meaning. Viewers are asked to interact with the objects, and the table is there for them to spread out on. The

format is meant to reference my real space, and anyone that has been to my house or studio will recognize some or all parts of this piece.



Fig 5: *Box*, 2015-2016, box, sentimental objects, 7½"x11"



Fig 6: *Box (Installation)*, 2016, sentimental objects, furniture, rug
Yearbook, 2016, binder with paperwork, 10"x12"

This setup is my life condensed, so it naturally conflicts with a gallery space. The objects in the box are not traditionally art, but life, which is how they help to breakdown the distinction between the two when interacted with in a gallery. This work puts life in the gallery and art in the world. The informality of the setup breaks some of the conventions of the space, and the work itself breaks others, which

allows the real human-ness of these objects to come forward. This piece also references objects in the viewer's own lives, a universal tendency to collect things we value. Viewers remark "I have one of these boxes too!" as they experience my sentimental collection, calling their own contents to mind.

Also on the table is a binder of certificates of authenticity. For this piece, I asked people I interacted with to register their experiences with Em, Lem, or Emma as official works of art. The piece was initially conceived of as a tongue-in-cheek way to talk about a performance that existed in the real world, and as a way to poke fun at the commodification of artwork. Each official document has a space where anyone can write about an experience they had, then official language and signatures that authenticate that experience as a work of art by Emma Fiandt. The papers were a funny way for me to make my performance exist.

As people began to return the forms to me, the work became something much sweeter. In asking people I know to reflect on the experience, I got to see myself in the world. Many of the collectors wrote about experiences with Emma and again, through the work, I came into focus. The writings are almost like a yearbook for me, memories in others own script about how I exist for them. The handwriting functions like the hair or my voice, but this time it characterizes the other humans in this work. The papers are both formal and sentimental, so they simultaneously represent connection and defiance.

The certificates of authentication are another area in which the viewer can interact directly with the art, change the work, and see the construction of self in their own lives. There's a certain amount of pressure associated with the formality

of the paperwork that breeds careful consideration. In asking the viewer to reflect on the characters in the world, they are required to identify and consider a moment in their life that was constructed around gendered expectations of identity. The written aspect is almost like art homework, it solidifies and engrains the story in the viewer's mind, and hopefully with it the results of this project—that it's always best to be yourself.

The last piece that I made as a part of this body of work is again about connection, but this time with an animal. Mounted near the floor to the side of my own hair pieces is a pillow made from the hair my dog sheds. This piece has the strongest relationship with abjection, a sense of repulsion and desire that runs through much of my work, especially that which uses hair. The hair here comes from the living thing with which I am most myself. My dog's hair is smellier, dirtier, more upsetting to imagine up against your face, yet he is both my physical and emotional comfort—much of the hair was lost during hugs or in my bed. This work retains the weird obsessive nature of keeping hair, and changed another aspect of how I live as I carefully collected the shedding. The sentimental power of hair as a part of a living being also lingers, but in this case isolates my dog and I together as creators of this work; Loneliness is, again, central.



Fig 7: *Kazi's Pillow*, 2016, dog hair, fabric, 8"x10"

However, this piece also confronts one of my deep fears as a woman—ending up alone. There is a new cultural stereotype for spinsters, where the “crazy cat lady” is more of a dog person, and she loads her rescues into a Subaru for trips to the park. This is already me. I recently went to a friend’s wedding, and her mom, who I hadn’t seen in many years, asked a group of us if we had boyfriends. I would have loved to say “oh yeah, he’s a fighter pilot, we’re thinking of getting engaged,” like the girl next to me, but I responded: “I have a really loving dog.” Parts of me worry that I’m already Liz Lemon from *30 Rock*, Cathy from *Cathy comics*—a cartoon of a lonely person, potentially unlovable, and hugging a dog hair pillow for warmth.

When I started working on this performative project, I wasn’t sure where it was going to go or what it would say. I knew that I wanted to experiment and learn something new. I wanted to have a better understanding of gender roles, and how they were formed. I wanted to know myself better. But I think that I also desperately wanted to see what it would be like to be someone else. I wanted defense mechanisms for my embarrassment, different-ness, and disappointment in myself. I

wanted a way to talk about who I am without the vulnerability of having to actually be her. I also thought I could simplify myself into fitting in. And after a long process and an almost unreasonable amount of introspection, I've found that the work is fundamentally about the futility of all of that.

It's not any easier to be Em than Lem. They both still feel out of place most of the time, they both want things they can't have. They both smile and hurt and get pissed. Neither of them is good at being a woman the way she feels she should. After having been both, I have become most comfortable being myself. The problems that I faced as these women, and as Emma are not ours alone—the grass isn't greener.

They've also helped me to identify and eliminate invisible forces that bind me to certain personality traits, ways of living, or self-images. In taking apart my personality and rearranging it, I was able to identify biases about myself that were actually unduly influenced by the media, my upbringing, and weird cultural feelings about gender. The work confronts the danger of unnecessary social expectations by following them down the rabbit hole and eventually discovers that internalization of these forces leads necessarily to personal dissatisfaction.

I have come to know myself better through this work and I feel ready now, to be myself. The final piece of this extended performance was for me to symbolically re-absorb Em and Lem, and emerge an unafraid Emma. I did so in the form of a live performance where I got a haircut in the gallery, removing all the colored hair and returning to my natural look. This gesture was my way of removing the Em and Lem costumes. Dramatic removal of hair often represents becoming a new person, transforming physically as a symbol of emotional transformation. The removal of

the hair also destroys its power in my life—I will no longer be chained to Em and Lem, nor the gender expectations they represent. Now I can be Emma.



Fig 8: *Haircut*, 2016, live performance, hair.

Again, this experience is something everyone can relate to—the nervous excitement of a big haircut. Though my work is deeply personal, it also applies more generally to humans. I’m hardly the only person that feels like two different people, that’s lonely, that worries about how others see her, or that she’ll end up alone. I wanted to make work that was fun and approachable, but also honest, so that viewers would see themselves in the process. This work has been emotionally intense, not a process I would recommend everyone commits to, but its results are widely relevant. I hope that while what I’ve made gives me comfort and confidence

in myself, it can support comfort and confidence in anyone's journey toward understanding their own identity. I am here for you.

Works Cited

- Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *We Should All be Feminists*. London: Harper Collins, 2014. Print.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen* 16, no.4 (1975): 6-18.